Chapter

7

Understanding
Individual Differences

*"If a man does not keep pace with his companions,
perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.
Let him step to the music which he hears, however
measured or far away."*

Henry David Thoreau

Understanding human behavior has intrigued psychologists for years. Journals filled with studies on human behavior in one form or another line the walls of university libraries. Yet we still struggle with interpersonal communication because our own attitudes, interests, and perspectives are different from others. This is becoming even more complicated as our communities become more diverse. In order to appreciate and advantageously welcome such diversity, in culture, gender, age, or even in those characteristics which make us unique individuals, we must honor difference.

One of the most widely used tools for understanding difference is the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator® or MBTI®, a personality inventory based on Swiss psychologist/anthropologist/man of letters, Carl Gustav Jung's book, *Psychological Types.* Jung's model of psychological type, as embodied in the MBTI®, has been purported to be the only theory of human psychology that is based on normal populations and that emphasizes the constructive use of differences, rather than simply classifying and defining differences as matters of good-better-best or normal-abnormal outcomes.

Jung's interpretations of his studies are that the different styles of perception, judgment, and energy flow are just that—different. One is not bad and the other good, or one better than another. "Society may not take kindly to a

model in which everybody wins, but…this model is the key to successfully navigating the future."

You may be asking what Jungian theory has to do with volunteers. In response, you will be much more effective as volunteer administrators if you are aware of how people-volunteers, legitimately differ. This chapter is about how you can identify, understand, and value human difference in *constructive* and *productive* ways. Much conflict can occur when people differ in their approach, assumptions, and perceptions; and if you understand how operating style differences can affect the way people behave, you can learn how to work with them more effectively, and this can greatly impact a volunteer's satisfaction and commitment.

Recognizing the eight MBTI dimensions

Recognizing the eight dimensions of the MBTI is not as difficult as it seems. If you take a minute to look over the characteristics, you will most likely find the dimensions that have the best "fit" for you. However, it may be well worth the time, effort, and money to send away for an official personality assessment form. Several web sites also offer the test and even score and report on the results at no charge.

1st **dimension:** Jung suggested that we can sort typical mental habits among opposite poles of three personality dimensions. The first dimension refers to the primary source and direction of a person's energy. According to Jungian theory, the primary direction of psychological energy is focused either toward the outer world (extroversion), or the inner world (introversion).

2nd **dimension:** Mental or cognitive function, or the way we perceive information and which kind of information is most attractive to us constitutes the second dimension. The two poles for this dimension are *sensing,* a preference for sensory data—data we recognize with our five senses; and *intuition,* a preference for relational, abstract data that we recognize with our intuition.

3rd **dimension:** Jung's third dimension also refers to mental or cognitive function and pertains to our typical patterns for making decisions or judgments about the information we have perceived. The two opposing poles of this dimension are *thinking,* making decisions based on interest in and attention to an object with cause-and-effect analysis; and *feeling,* making decisions on personal values and relational impact.

4th **dimension:** When Myers-Briggs used Jung's dimensions in her various studies about personality, she contributed a fourth dimension to the Jungian schema. This dimension deals with orientation either toward orderliness and decisiveness, called *judgment,* or toward new information and "going with the flow," called *perception.*

None of these dimensions are mutually exclusive. Most people fall somewhere on a continuum between the two poles of each dimension as illustrated below. When taking the personality assessment, don't ask the question, "Which one do I do?" but rather "Which one do I prefer first?" or "Which one is most comfortable or reliable?" Most mentally healthy people will have and use both poles in each dimension, but they usually have a definite **preference** for one over the other.

Because interpersonal effectiveness begins with self-knowledge and acceptance, use this assessment as one of many ways of understanding yourself first. By becoming aware of your personal preferences for responding and functioning, you not only understand yourself better, but are enabled to modify your behavior in ways that are more effective with people who are different from you. The assessment exercise will also help you to learn and accept difference in others. Often, we conclude that if others are different from us, then one or the other must be wrong and therefore, changed. Kiersey & Bates in their book *Please Understand Me* called this idea that we need to change others to be more like us, "Our Pigmalion Project." Regarding this drive to change others, they write:

Fortunately, this project is impossible. To sculpt the other into our own likeness fails before it begins. People can't change form no matter how mush and in what manner we require them to. Form is inherent, ingrained, indelible. Ask a snake to swallow itself. Ask a person to change form—think or want differently—and you ask the impossible, for it is the thinking and wanting that is required to change the thinking and wanting. Form cannot be self-changing. Of course, some change is possible, but it is twisting and distortion of underlying form. Remove the fangs of a lion and behold a toothless lion, not a domestic cat. Our attempts to change spouse, offspring, or others can result in change, but the result is a scar and not a transformation.

The goal of preference typing, then, is to be sensitive to and appreciate the difference in others, accept those differences, and learn how to adapt our own style to relate effectively with others. Another goal is to develop interdependence and join with others in mutually enhancing ways. The volunteer world can only benefit from this type of synergy.

Dangers of Typing

Obviously, anytime you try and categorize people you enter a danger zone. Clumping people into groups defies the very nature of appreciating diversity. In order to avoid these pitfalls consider some of the drawbacks:

- Some people will feel so confident at preference typing that they may make snap judgments about others based solely by how they have "typed" them.

- Often type is confused with competence. Remember that typologies are descriptive, not predictive.

- People may think a person's preferred operating style reflects their capabilities and skills. For example, if a volunteer is typed as an introvert, then others may assume the volunteer would rather work alone and never give them a group assignment.

- People can easily be lead to adopt too narrow a view of human behavior and ignore the richness of human diversity.

If volunteer administrators are careful to avoid these common pitfalls, the use of personality typing can be a powerful tool in all aspects of a volunteer program. We hope, as you complete this chapter, the benefits will become evident.

MBTI Dimensions

Extrovert ⟷ Introvert

Primary Source of Direction of a Person's Energy

Extrovert	Introvert
Like variety and action	Prefer quiet/reflection
People are energy source	Prefer small groups
Enthusiastic communicators	Drained by social events
Often think out loud	Prefer to write/think
Want to discuss topics	about ideas before
before communication on paper	discussing them

INtuitive ⟷ Sensing

The Way We Perceive Information

INtuitive	Sensing
Look at future and possibilities	Like facts, details, specifics
Prefer big picture and concepts	Are practical,"down to earth"
Enjoy new ideas, learning new skills	More interested in application
Are visionaries; follow their dreams	than theory
but may not be able to explain their	Are suspicious of the abstract
rationale	

Thinking ⟷ Feeling

How we Make Decisions or Judgments about Information

Thinking	Feeling
Tend to be analytical & objective	Are concerned with how de-cisions will affect people
Often make decisions without	Tend to be appreciative and
considering impact on people	personable
Value logic over harmony	Value harmony over logic
Appreciate information that is	
well-organized and supported	

Judging ⟷ Perceiving

A person's Orientation to the World and Concerns Decision Making

Judging	Perceiving
Desire closure	Dislike deadlines
Good time managers	Are flexible and adaptable
Tend to be organized	Are usually spontaneous
Want to see things structured	Are often uncomfortable
	with time management

Leadership Styles or Functioning Pairs

Kiersey and Bates found that within the eight dimensions of the MBTI, common tendencies and preferences emerged to create four leadership, or functioning pairs: **SP, SJ, NF,** and **NT.** These functioning pairs facilitate leadership and have proven useful in teamwork, giving feedback, recognition and in handling conflict. This is another way of looking at these aspects when dealing with volunteers.

The following chart will help you understand some of the characteristics of each functioning pair, followed by suggested use of this information in these three areas: teamwork, feedback, and recognition as they particularly apply to volunteers. Use this information as you see fit. This is not a magic wand but can be very instrumental in understanding how volunteers prefer to function in groups as well as how to communicate both feedback and appreciation. Also, in chapter eight, the functioning pairs will be discussed again in reference to handling conflict.

Leadership Styles/Functional Pairs

Strengths

SJ	NT	NF	SP
Conserves tradition	Tries to understand the "Whys"	People oriented	"here and now" reality
Bound by rules	Goal setter	Values harmony	Natural negotiator
Duty to serve	Driver	Values relationships	Realistic
Belief in structure	Rational	Desire to inspire, persuade	Hungers for action without constraint
Can be analytical	Works to improve	Focus on good in others	Attitude of sureness
Values policies	Love of knowledge	Wants to please	Confident
Creates stability	Problem Solver	Values uniqueness	Tremendous stamina
Dependable	Focus on possibility	Needs to live a life of significance	Works well in crisis
Loyal to the org	Architects of change		Flexible, will change
			Can take risks

Challenges/potential weaknesses

SJ	NT	NF	SP
Not responsive to a need for change	Reluctant to state the obvious	Give of time and self too easily	Impulsive—only reality is the 'here and now'
Can decide too quickly	Demanding of self and others	Gives too much autonomy and freedom	Dislikes theory
Excessive concern for potential crisis	Impatience with perceived incompetence	Easily hurt-personalizes criticism	Unpredictable
Impatient with delays and complications	Can be perceived as elitist or arrogant	Too much focus on people—not enough on task	Easily bored when no crises exist
Rule bound	Dislike for following details	Decisions based on emotions rather than logic	Dislike producing written documents
			Must have autonomy

Using functioning pairs in teamwork:

When building a team for a special project or committee, it is always advisable to select teams that reflect more than one or two functioning pairs. Use your knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of each pair to build a team that seems to match the project or committee. For example, if you were considering putting together a committee (team) to put on a special fund raising event, you may want to consider the following combination: an SJ to organize the event, make sure the details are taken care of and chart the progress by keeping everyone on task; one or more NFs to sell the project to sponsors & others, to be there on the day of the event to mingle with the crowd and network, help ask for that needed money; an NT to help set the goals of the event and look at the possible ways of raising the money; and at least one SP to handle any crises that arise during the planning period and also when something falls through on the day of the event. It is unrealistic to believe that every team can have all aspects of leadership involved, but as this example illustrates, each functioning pair brings strengths that create a well-rounded team. Of course, other important aspects needed on a team should be considered as well such as past experience, skills, and outside contacts.

Using functioning pairs to give feedback

Giving feedback is important in communicating with others, especially if you want to create synergy with your group. Feedback encourages questions and helps clarify situations in order to avoid real and escalating conflict. However, giving feedback is difficult because it implies evaluation and can impact the other person's self esteem. You can be more effective if you vary your approach to feedback according to the preference of the person to whom you are giving the feedback. You can incorporate your knowledge about functioning pairs to do this. Use the following information to help you when giving feedback and information.

SJs: Because SJs tend to be factual and decisive, they respond best to very specific and factual feedback. Before you give feedback, be prepared with specifics of behavior and evidence to validate you perceptions. If you can show that their behavior did impact the task and other people had the same perception, SJs are likely to respond well to the feedback. Also, be ready to give SJs specific behavioral suggestions.

SPs: SPs are usually very open to new information and will probably be receptive of any feedback you give them. SPs are always on the move, so finding the appropriate time to approach them is difficult. Be sensitive to this and ask if you can offer feedback at this time. State your observations and suggestions in concrete and specific terms, and be sure your suggestions aren't ones that conflict with their nature (i.e. don't suggest they be more decisive or organized). Since SPs trust perceptions, express feedback in terms of how you felt about their behavior or how you and others perceived them. Offer alternative suggestions so they have flexibility to choose.

NTs: Because NTs focus on possibilities, theoretical relationships and abstract patterns; you may want to establish a broad context for giving feedback. It is especially useful if you can identify patterns of behavior such as: "you have called and said this several times." Usually NTs are not as concerned with how their behavior affects others or the impact on others. Instead they will want to see the big picture and to understand, conceptually, how their behavior is less effective than it might be.

NFs: Like NTs, NFs look for patterns, however, they are also very interested in the effect of their behavior on and relationships with others. Usually your feedback will simply confirm their own sense that something is going wrong. NFs are sensitive, so your feedback should confirm that you value them even though you need to give them information on their behavior. If you focus on how their behavior has consequences for others and continually check on their feelings through this process, you will be more effective. Using the phrase, "How do you feel about _____" is a good approach with NFs.

(Bacon, T.R, 1996, *Effective People Skills.* Durango, CA: International Learning Works, Inc.)